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The New Power Center: Oversight Unseen

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—What power center in the United States Government shall control our ability to respond to covert Communist expansion during Cold War II?

That question underlies the struggle now going on about "intelligence oversight." The staff members chosen to operate the permanent Congressional oversight committees will, in effect, run the C.I.A. for the next decade, when that eviscerated agency may be faced with its greatest challenge.

That is why the Church committee in the Senate and the Pike committee in the House have been so intensely political in their investigations: Both power and patronage are at stake.

The other day, a young person sporting the title of "Investigator" for the Pike committee called several former White House denizens to ask: "Do you know about the list of newsmen who were on the C.I.A. payroll? Do you recall President Nixon asking C.I.A. Deputy Director [Lt. Gen. Vernon A.] Walters for such a list?"

When one of the aides suggested that a more direct way to go about finding such information would be to subpoena such files from the C.I.A., the investigator sighed: "We have a lot of trouble getting subpoenas."

Evidently, the House leadership is less willing than the Senate to oversight the C.I.A. into oblivion; meanwhile, over in the Senate, intelligence oversight is recognized as the future happy dovecote for a neo-isolationist bureaucracy.

At this moment, the temporary Church committee staff consists of 92 ambitious people, drawing salaries at the rate of over \$2 million a year. The pay is unmatched in private life: 17 secretaries average \$280 per week, and 25 attorneys (mostly young, and some qualified to be advance men in Presidential campaigns) draw salaries at the average yearly rate of nearly \$30,000. Everybody wants his place at the trough, when the permanent committee is formed.

For this overpaid oversight, taxpay-

ers have received a useful lesson in doublestandardbearing. When the sworn testimony of Kennedy White House aides conflicts directly with the sworn testimony of other witnesses, this year's Senate select committee does not ask the Justice Department for perjury prosecution; on the contrary, lack of Senate cooperation is hampering Justice in its grand jury investigation of former C.I.A. chief Richard Helms.

The reason for this obstruction of Justice by the Church committee is known to many, but printed by none: A beloved and patriotic United States Senator might be associated with any Helms perjury charge. If Richard Helms sees jail at the end of his road, he may threaten to take that Senator and a Cabinet member with him.

The result is what Thomas Powers, of *Commonweal* magazine calls "an investigation that conceals as much as it reveals." Television news goes along with this concealment, and when Washington Post ombudsman Charles Seib wrote a mild criticism of the way his paper played down the Kennedy-

C.I.A. Mafia link, his column on that subject was killed: Editor Ben Bradlee decreed in his book that Kennedy scandals he knows about must await "another decade."

Thus, the alliance struck up between Washington press and the Democratic Congress three years ago to strike down a President lingers and festers, continuing long after the power has swung to another center. With the Presidency greatly weakened, most of the press has not yet adjusted to take a position adversary to today's main locus of power, which is Congress. Mistakenly, sluggishly, the press remains an ally of, rather than becoming a watchful critic of, the new "oversight" which is an invitation to corruption.

Instead of demanding to know why Frank Sinatra, Angie Dickenson, Peter Lawford and Dean Martin are not called to testify about the way the Giancana-Roselli mob penetrated the White House, we cluck sympathetically with Frank Church's reluctance to ask the F.B.I. to look into the

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first murder of a prospective Senate witness.

Instead of demanding to know now about the results of the completed investigation of candidate Church's other investigating committee with its expected revelations about Lockheed's payment to the West German political party of Franz Josef Strauss for pushing the purchase of the "Starfighter" in the Kennedy era—we let him get away with timing his headlines to suit the news requirements of the Church Presidential candidacy.

The new power center of intelligence oversight is now putting down permanent roots. Abuse of its power could render impotent our ability to resist the spread of totalitarianism. In failing to put the spotlight of pitiless publicity now on oversight's lush patronage, its hypocrisy in playing political favorites, and its skill in managing the news, we are condoning the concealment of a dagger of venality beneath a cloak of reform.